

# Klondike Photographer's Lode

Dianne Newell

Rec'd: Mar 30/82  
Order No.:  
Price: Ill-Xerox  
Acc. No.: Leg. Lib., Sask.

By the summer of 1897 word had spread throughout the western world of fabulous placer gold discoveries in the subarctic wilderness of the Yukon. The Klondike gold rush was on.

That rush, judging from the thousands of Klondike photographs that survive in public library and archives collections alone, may well have been the most photographed event from the time of the invention of the camera a half century earlier. The photographs vividly portray a story that would otherwise have seemed incredible. They were important at the time because what people saw in the photographs influenced their decisions about joining the rush; they are important today because they form the basis for an ambitious Klondike restoration project.

One hundred thousand adventurers and gold-seekers made their way to the Klondike between 1897 and 1898. The richness of the goldfields and the novelty of the Klondike experience—and consequently the international publicity the gold rush received—proved the attractions.

It was probably the setting more than anything else that distinguished the Klondike from such other goldfields as those discovered in California (1840s) and British Columbia (1860s). Those two regions were relatively accessible and at least offered to an unsuccessful gold-seeker the alternative of settling on the land. The Klondike goldfields by contrast were located in an isolated, inhospitable territory. A journey there was hazardous and expensive. Ironically the

Klondike was known as the Poor Man's Rush, meaning that gold was found in loose deposits easily worked by hand and simple equipment, and not that poor men could afford the journey.

The goldfields lay deep in Alaska-Yukon territory, on the Canadian side of the international boundary. The only practical way into the interior was via the 2,000 mile Yukon River, which originated in southeastern Yukon and traversed the entire Alaska-Yukon territory to the Bering Sea in northwestern Alaska. While the river, quite fortunately for gold-seekers, was navigable almost its entire length, navigation was limited to a few summer months when the river was not frozen solid. Klondikers had to travel north from Seattle and other ports along the Pacific coastline to Alaska. Then they had two options. They could disembark at Skagway or Juneau, push overland and through the mountains to the headwaters of the Yukon and ride north in makeshift boats down the Yukon to Dawson and the nearby mining district. Or they could continue by steamer up the Alaskan coast to the Bering Sea and the mouth of the Yukon. From there it was a 1,500 mile journey south to Dawson.

*Chilkoot Pass, where the grade to the summit was 30 degrees; the line of men inched up the mountain at the pace of the slowest climber. (Eric A. Hegg) All photographs, unless noted, from Photography Collection, Suzzallo Library, University of Washington*

Pam: 77: (\*430) NEW







Anxious Klondikers sought the safest, cheapest and fastest route. But no contemporary route, as it turned out, satisfied all three requirements. The Chilkoot Pass and the all-water routes were the best known. The latter was safest and easiest and the only route for heavy supplies, but it was also long, taking six months to a year for the trip between Seattle and Dawson. It cost as much as \$1,000. The former was a route over the mountains, riskier and more difficult but faster and cheaper.

Not only was it difficult to get to the Klondike, but all supplies and food, other than fresh meat, had to be brought in from the south. Canadian police at the international boundary required all gold-seekers who entered the Yukon to come equipped with a year's supply of goods and clothing. A practical and humanitarian measure, to be sure, the regulation nevertheless proved a substantial financial and physical burden to gold-seekers scrambling for quick riches. Klondike outfits that would meet police requirements cost anywhere from \$100 to \$1,000, depending on the quality of goods and where they were purchased. These bulky outfits weighing several tons had to be hauled and protected from destruction or loss during the journey.

It was not lunacy that led men and women to undertake the risks and hardships of the Klondike. Rather, it was the promise that this was the long-sought mother lode. Throughout the 19th century increasingly rich goldfields had been opened up farther and farther north along the Pacific coast

of North America. With each discovery prospectors hoped to uncover the original source of the deposits. The extreme northern location of the Klondike fields and the enormous nuggets found there—one-pound nuggets worth \$300 were not uncommon and nuggets worth as much as \$1,500 were also found—were naturally viewed by the public as signs that this was the legendary land of solid gold.

The gold rush tide swelled in 1897 and reached flood proportions in 1898, when approximately 50,000 gold-seekers who had wintered over on the trails waiting for the Yukon to thaw "stampeded" to Dawson. Upon arriving they learned that all the claims had been staked, although claims could be purchased for fabulous sums or worked for wages. Over the winter Dawson changed from an assemblage of flimsy tents and log cabins to a boom town of 50,000 with permanent businesses and residents.

By 1899 excitement over the Klondike had subsided. The gold rush appeared over. Reports of the Spanish-American War crowded Klondike news off the pages of newspapers. Gold discoveries at Nome, Alaska, drew away many Klondike adventurers. The first stage of construction of the White Pass and Yukon Railway was completed from Skagway to the headwaters of the Yukon, opening up the southern route to swift and easy travel and eliminating the isolation of the goldfields. But mining activities, although no longer publicized, did not end. Mining simply entered a new phase, that of mechanical

dredging and company operation.

From beginning to end the saga of the Klondike gold rush was thoroughly documented in photographs. The proliferation of Klondike views is testimony to the popularity of the gold rush as a subject and photography as a pastime and an art. There was an enormous commercial market for Klondike photographs, both to validate or dramatize Klondike literature and as souvenirs. The important invention a few years earlier of dry plate photography meant that exposed plates did not have to be developed immediately. This allowed relatively efficient photography under frontier conditions. For Klondikers who wished to provide their own mementos, inexpensive and relatively fool-proof portable roll film cameras, widely available and popular for more than a decade, were available. Such photographic equipment was specially packed and heavily advertised by retailers and mail-order houses as "amateur outfits" for the Klondike trade.

Dozens of enterprising professional photographers joined and photographed the gold rush and it is largely their work, rather than the snapshots taken by amateurs, that is preserved in public collections. These men set up temporary studios anywhere they could along the route—on sleighs, in tents and boats. In the handful of camps swarming with stampedeers they established more permanent quarters. Because their Klondike views were widely circulated, especially in the popular press, a number of these professionals—including Frank La

Roche, Edward P. Larss, Joseph N. Duclos, Edward J. Hamacher, Ashall Curtis, Dobbs and Newell, Winter and Pond—achieved reputations approaching those of Klondike raconteurs Robert Service and Jack London.

One name stands foremost: Eric A. Hegg. Hegg (1868–1955) was a Swedish-born, Wisconsin-trained photographer. In *One Man's Gold Rush: A Klondike Album* (University of Washington Press, 1967), biographer Murray Morgan calls him a pictorial documenter rather than a camera artist, although he surely was both.

Hegg's earliest photographs of the rush offer a glimpse of the excitement that swept towns throughout turn-of-the-century America, especially San Francisco, Seattle, Portland and Vancouver. In these cities merchants vied for the lucrative trade of Klondike gold-seekers as they departed for the goldfields. Hegg's photographs depict storefronts piled high with Klondike outfits, and steamers and docks teeming with Klondike hopefuls. He rushed north with the first wave of Klondikers during the summer of 1897. Dragging his cumbersome load of glass plate photography equipment across the coastal mountains and down the Yukon to Dawson, he occasionally stopped along the way and retraced parts of the tortuous route to capture in photo-

*Chilkat Indian bearer in posed photograph. Chilkats were physically strong and knowledgeable about the trail.* (Eric A. Hegg)














Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2022 with funding from  
University of Alberta Library

<https://archive.org/details/klondikephotogra00newe>



graphs all phases of the journey. Hegg, like other Klondike photographers, financed his journey to the goldfields by following the common practice of selling souvenir portraits and general Klondike views to gold-seekers. His most famous photographs of the gold rush are those views that came to symbolize its adversities. They depict an unending line of humanity, bent under heavy loads, scaling the 30 degree grade of the Chilkoot Pass—the famous Trail of '98.

In the fall of 1897 Hegg established at Dawson a permanent studio. Fittingly it was a log cabin with a canvas roof. In and out of Dawson for the next three years, he recorded the city's streetscapes, showing its evolution from a tent town to a clapboard metropolis. Along with other photographers he pictured its personalities—the tycoons, prostitutes and Northwest police—and its celebrations, such as 4th of July parades. He captured the Dawson waterfront in popular sprawling panoramic views and in novel photographs taken under the midnight sun. He photographed thermometers registering 80 degrees below zero.

While he usually worked alone, Hegg sometimes collaborated with other photographers including Edward P. Larrs. This gave him the freedom to spend long periods of time away from town documenting the gold creeks while continuing his Dawson business. His photographs of the 800-square-mile mining district capture the modest life of miners and their toil under difficult conditions. His views

of the creeks laced with wooden sluices and the surrounding terrain stripped of trees say more than any written description or statistical tables could about the extent to which the fields were being worked.

Hegg spent 20 years in the region as an itinerant photographer. In addition to the Klondike gold rush, he followed the rush to Nome, documented the extraordinary feat of engineering required to build the White Pass and Yukon Railway and recorded the industrialization of Yukon gold mining. A nearly complete collection (4,000) of his Alaska-Yukon photographs survives, with most of the originals housed at the University of Washington Library in Seattle.

Klondike views taken to satisfy the curiosity of a late-Victorian public and for a long time simply collectors' items are now to be put to service for the Canadian and United States Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Parks. These are unprecedented park projects eliciting the cooperative management efforts of the United States, Canada, the state of Alaska, the province of British Columbia, the Yukon Territory and the cities of Seattle and Skagway.

The gold rush will be traced in a ribbon of historical and recreational zones (constituting United States and Canadian national and international parks) stretching from Seattle through the Alaskan panhandle port of Skagway to Dawson.

The interpretive theme will encompass the entire stampede epic, but the spotlight will be on a number of distinctive

stories in major United States interpretive centers located in Seattle at the Pioneer Square Historic District and in Skagway at a Skagway historic district. Dyea, a ghost town that, like Skagway, was a gateway to the goldfields, will be left as is. Interpretation at Dyea will be pictorial. The White Pass and Chilkoot trails will be developed by the United States and Canada for hiking. In addition, Canada is developing the Yukon River route that leads from the international boundary near Skagway, down the river to Dawson and the nearby goldfields. Dawson, with its rich heritage of gold rush architecture, will be the major Canadian interpretive center. Development of a mining site at the creeks is also planned.

In essence, the gold rush historical park interpretive program will be directed toward reviving the sense of urgency and anticipation that filled the air during the Klondike gold rush—the hot commercial rivalries, the Trail of '98, the legendary Klondike characters, the stir of gold rush "cities" and the rhythm at the creeks of panning, sluicing and dredging for gold. For this work park planners possess a real bonanza in the thousands of dramatic photographs that portray the Klondike saga, a migration unique in history.

*Dianne Newell, vice president of the Society for Industrial Archeology, is a doctoral candidate in Canadian history at the University of Western Ontario. The thesis for her master's degree was on Klondike gold rush publicity.*

*Below: Totem grave. Opposite page, above: Dozing prospector (Eric A. Hegg) and Berry brothers cabin, Eldorado, Yukon Territory, 1900 (Kinsey and Kinsey)*

*Opposite page, middle: Steamer Resolute at Skagway, March 10, 1900, and railroad trestle bridge. (Eric A. Hegg)*

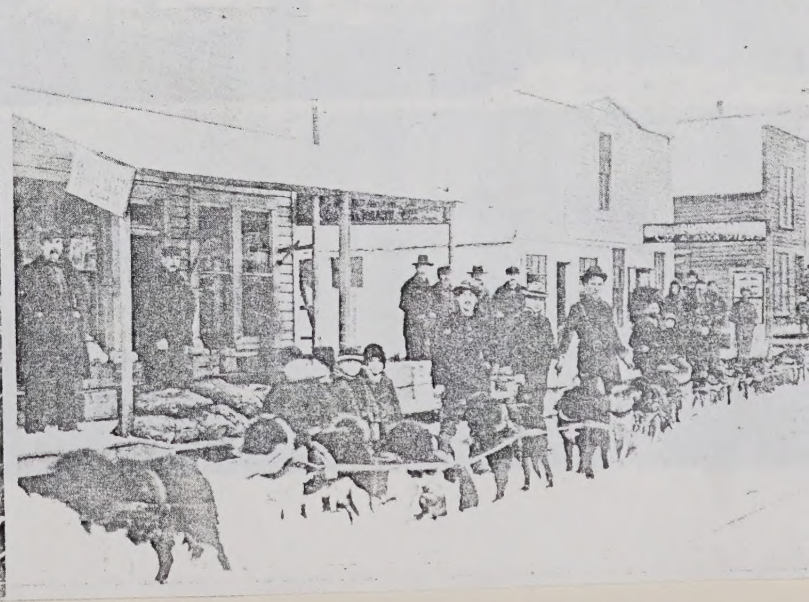
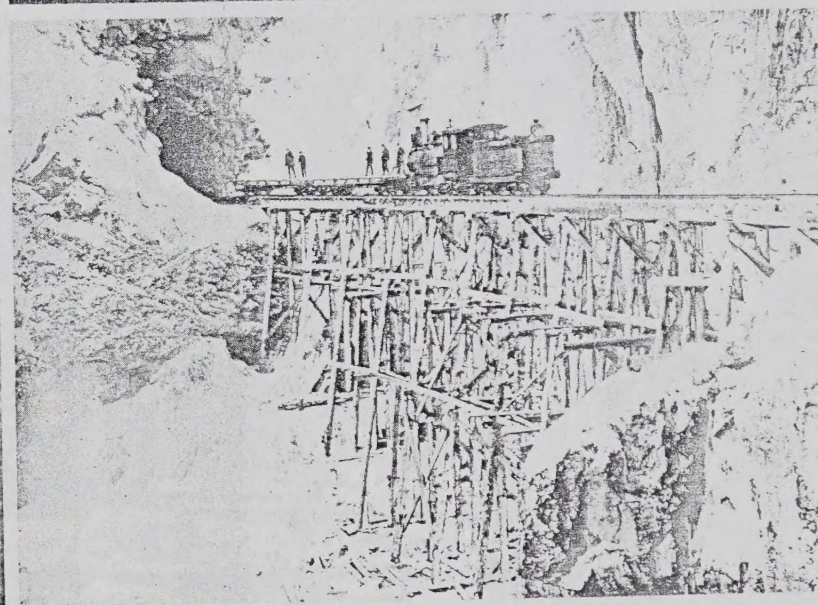
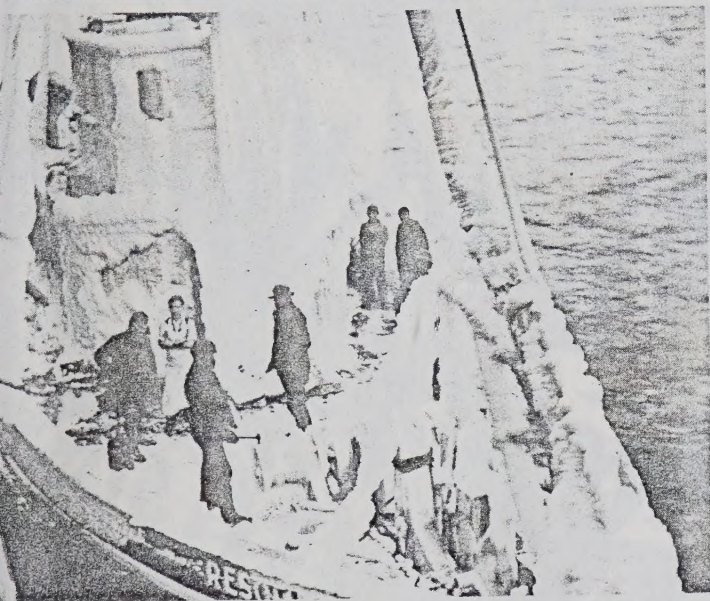
*Opposite page, below: Hegg's boat and dog train at Skagway. (Eric A. Hegg)*



















Above left: Charles Ainsworth at Sixty-Above-Discovery on Sulphur Creek, 1898. (Asahel Curtis)

Above right: Snowstorm at Chilkoot Pass Summit. (Eric A. Hegg)

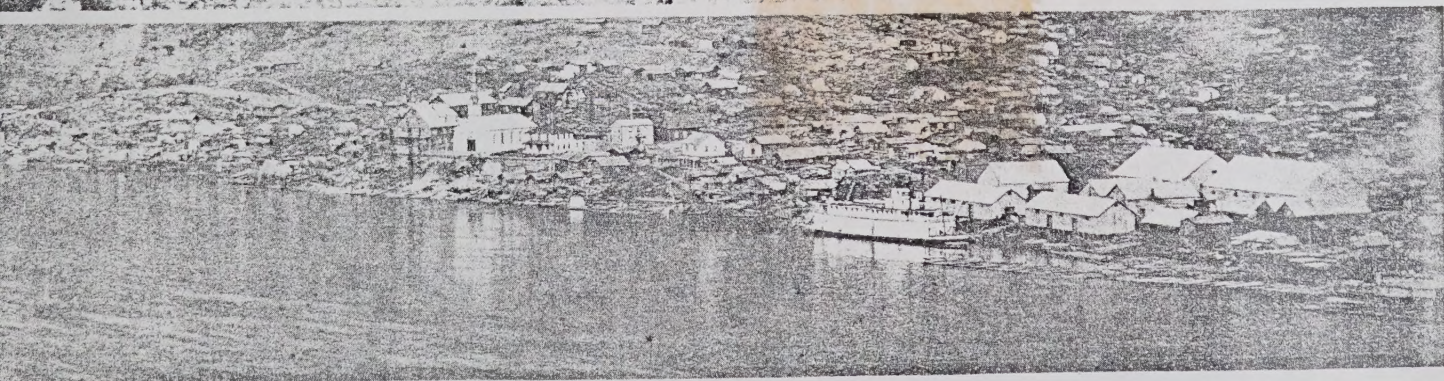
Right: 1901 view of Dawson by Kinsey and Kinsey. (Courtesy Dianne Newell)













Date Due

Dec 82

48685

Pam:77: (\*430)  
NEW

NEWELL, Dianne

AUTHOR

Klondike photographer's lode.

TITLE

DATE LOANED	BORROWER'S NAME	DATE DUE
Staff	J. Singh	Dec. 92

48685

BOREAL INSTITUTE FOR NORTHERN STUDIES, LIBRARY  
THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA  
EDMONTON, ALBERTA T6G 2E9  
CANADA







University of Alberta Library



0 1620 0337 6447